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The forgotten side of quality: Quality of education construct impact on quality assurance system

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Abstract

The paper probes the hypothesis that the quality of education construct used in the design and management of the quality assurance system led to its ineffectiveness and additional negative side-effects on the whole higher education.

An alternative construct for the quality of education is submitted, to be used as a foundation for an improved quality of education law and quality assurance practice. The construct takes into account the needs of both beneficiaries and providers of education programs and also, the fact that some of the needs may not be fully acknowledged.

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1. Problem statement

The current quality assurance system for Romanian higher education was set up after the Law for Quality in Education was passed by Romanian Parliament in 2006 (Parlamentul României, 2006).

It inherited the infrastructure, most of the people and also procedures, values and attitudes from the former National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation. The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) has been established within one month after the law being passed and became active in conducting quality assessment sessions beginning with the 2006-2007 academic year.

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The longer this system was active in assuring quality, *the more frequent* have been formulated critical remarks on the quality of higher education. Such remarks came even from a Commission appointed by the President (România educației, România cercetării, 2007), and from President of Romania himself.

We have in a number of studies (Lisievici, 2009; Lisievici, 2011; Lisievici, 2013) analysed the impact of the quality assurance system on the Romanian higher education and found no evidence of beneficial impact effects. We have found that this quality assurance system favoured control versus support, uniformity versus diversity, centralization versus academic freedom. We have also found that it diverted large financial, human and time resources from teaching, scientific activity and research. Instead of promoting an "evaluation culture", it generated a culture of preparing documentations and reports and rigging procedures for better scoring. Last but not least it did not provide support that would have been instrumental related to the demands is formulated.

This study analyses the conceptual foundations of the quality assurance system, as we suspect that at least part of this lack of positive impact can be explained by faulty constructs.

2. Weak conceptual foundations

2.1. The construct of Education

The Law of Quality in Education 87/2006 (Parlamentul României, 2006) in the second paragraph, defines education in terms of "programmes and activities" for academic or professional development.

This is an over-simplifying and confusing construct. For example, even in the Romanian educational literature, the concept of education has been defined in a much complex and accurate manner, sometimes using different levels of generality (Lisievici et al., 2005).

The concept of education used for building up the quality assurance system in Romania actually covers "formal education". For this fraction of the larger education concept, there are other denominations currently in use in domestic educational literature, like "învățământ".

2.2. The construct of Quality of Education

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has been active in conducting quality assessment exercises beginning with the 2006-2007 academic year.

However, one cannot find a *definition for the "quality of education"* in its main methodological document (ARACIS, 2006, E).

Let us presume that the institution uses the construct included in the Law of Quality in Education 87/2006. The definition associates the quality in education with meeting the "expectations" of the "beneficiaries" and the "quality standards". The law goes on to stipulate that there are "direct" beneficiaries, like the persons enrolled in education programmes, and "indirect" beneficiaries, like employers, employees, families of beneficiaries and, to a larger extent, the "whole society".

This construct is undermined by large number of issues, out of which we shall outline just a few.

Expectations versus needs

Most of the international and domestic reports and studies on the quality of education prefer to use the concept "needs" (OECD, 1989, Lisievici, 1997, Lisievici, 2009, EUA, 2013). Defining the quality of education as meeting the "expectations" of beneficiaries raises a serious validity problem: Expectations are highly subjective and involve *cognitive skills* like perceiving accurately, values clarification, making sound predictions and decisions. The existence and levels of development of such skills become critical for the quality of "expectations". For example, the "society" did not expect that a new vision of the universe, with the Sun in the centre of it was needed and might be developed, and Giordano Bruno was burned at stake for providing it, while Galileo Galilei narrowly escaped the same fate. At different points in time, "direct and indirect beneficiaries" of education did not expect that objects heavier than air would ever fly or that trains would ever go faster than 20 miles per hour.

Expectations might also be unreasonable, irrational, immoral or antisocial. Individuals may have "expectations" which, should they be met, would certainly not conduct to any progress regarding the quality of

education: Let us think about the expectations of one or more students to obtain an academic diploma with less or no effort from their part. Also, *not meeting* expectations of the "whole society" may sometimes be associated with *better quality*: During the communist regime in Romania the education system failed to indoctrinate the pupils and students with the official ideology. This was an indication of good quality rather than of a poor one.

On the other hand, meeting "needs" seem to be a more reliable foundation for defining quality. "Needs" can be more accurately identified by external observers and experts as well as education providers. Also, unlike expectations, needs do not pose a serious values clarification problem.

The validity foundations for standards

The second part of the construct of quality of education (meeting the "quality standards") is just by addition ("and") connected to the first (meeting the expectations of beneficiaries). If standards are not related to expectations of beneficiaries, what is the foundation for their validity? There is no other construct for the quality of education present in the Law or in ARACIS methodology that they can be derived from. There is no scientific evidence that meeting the quality standards included in ARACIS methodology has led to a better quality of Romanian higher education. The foundations for the validity of standards cannot be identified.

Moreover, in every sector of economy or society that uses the construct, quality is associated with creativity and freedom, rather than with uniformity and standardisation. High quality products of any kind are frequently "personalized", "custom made" or "client tailored". Having all the higher education institutions look alike and act alike is an approach that is counterproductive from the quality point of view. Let us imagine life on Earth, should some organization manage to regulate and standardize the mutations within the species or compile lists of "good" or "bad" mutations.

The implicit quality measurement paradigm

In both Romanian and English version of the ARACIS main methodological document it is stipulated that "A Performance Indicator represents an instrument for measuring the level of accomplishment of a certain activity carried out by an education providing organization against a standard" (ARACIS, 2006, E, p. 16). The whole document contains numerous suggestions that the quality of education can be rigorously measured. This is a misleading and even dangerous assumption.

Measurement is usually defined as the process of assigning a number to an attribute (or phenomenon) according to an explicit and rigorous rule (or set of rules).

This does not seem to work for the quality of education. Programmes of study that could appear of little relevance for the current social awareness may prove of extremely high value fifteen years from now. Moreover, creativity and intuition are difficult to measure, before the culture system is ready to understand and accept the elements of novelty. We *cannot* measure what does not yet exist, nor processes leading to the creation of yet non-existent skills, competencies or academic qualifications.

Setting irrelevant and even damaging standards and performance indicators

Performance indicator B.2.1.1. (ARACIS, 2006, E) states that, in order to demonstrate a good quality of a program of study, at least 70% of the graduates should find employment consistent with the level of their studies within two years from graduation. This vision seems consistent with a centrally planned state economy rather than with a free enterprise market economy. Higher education institutions functioning in free enterprise market economy should encourage graduates to use entrepreneurial skills in order to develop their own businesses and become *employers*, rather than *employees*.

3. The forgotten half of quality

3.1. The needs of both beneficiaries and providers of education

While the beneficiaries of education are not entirely neglected by the present domestic Quality of education law, even if the reference is made to their expectations, the needs of education providers are *completely left aside*

and no responsibility is allocated for taking care of them.

A high-end quality car is made from top resistance steel, last generation composite materials, expensive natural wood and leather, includes various driver assistance and security sensors and technologies and is much more expensive than a regular car, which “takes the driver from point A to point B”.

In order to offer high quality products, an education provider *also has costly needs to be accommodated*. Some of them require funding for a functional education environment, high teacher salaries, last generation education technologies, research grants, scholarships, quality support staff, teacher and student mobility, etc. Other needs require resources for projecting institutional and individual image, social status, attraction and retention capability for quality teachers and students.

It is interesting to point out that both domestic reports (România educației, România cercetării, 2007) as well as public discourse of preeminent personalities suggest that meeting the needs of education providers does not have a serious impact on the quality. Professor Mircea Micălea, ex Minister of Education has recently made some statements about the current situation of education in Romania (<http://www.ziare.com/mircea-miclea...>). Admitting that average teacher salary in Romania represents 0.9 of GDP per capita, while in the European Union is 1.2 of GDP per capita, professor Micălea states that the salaries do not represent a major issue. It is suggested that poor teachers are still being paid more than they deserve.

We are not aware of any serious domestic studies on the needs of either beneficiaries or providers of education. This may perhaps be explained by the prevalent models of thinking on the quality of education: “First give us quality and then, maybe, we shall inject some supplementary resources into the education system.”

In our opinion, psychological needs of both beneficiaries and providers of education are the least investigated and the least accommodated. Out of the psychological needs of education beneficiaries, we shall indicate the need for consistency between expected learning outcomes and the cognitive, emotional and social development of students, the need for success, and the need for emotional support. Out of the psychological needs of education providers we shall indicate the need for control over time and career management, the need for social status and the need for an education environment that is supportive for creativity and independence.

3.2. *The needs that beneficiaries and providers of education are not aware of*

The organised research, creativity and intuition of teachers or responsible governments may lead to satisfying needs that either beneficiaries or providers of education are not yet aware of. It is highly probable that such needs are associated with either specialised knowledge or skills that the beneficiaries have never been in contact with, or with technologies or infrastructure that the providers of education are not yet familiar with.

In our opinion, this *over accommodation of needs* is the distinctive mark of quality.

As centrally established standards cannot be tailored for the specific needs of every particular beneficiary or provider, a central role will have to be played by factors like values, organizational climate, communication and co-operation, creativity, acceptance of difference.

3.3. *The influence of high level decision makers*

There are decisions made at government level that have a major impact on the quality of education: The percentage of GDP allocated to education, the criteria used to allocate funds within the education system, the funding made available for research, the ways that the results of quality assessment visits are being used, etc. In both the letter and the spirit, the methodology developed by ARACIS (ARACIS, 2006, E., p. 7) allocates the responsibility for quality and quality management *exclusively to the universities*. The high level decision makers are currently disconnected from responsibility and accountability regarding quality of higher education. They are not motivated to assume own responsibilities related to quality assurance, but rather to allocate responsibility and often blame to education providers.

4. **A better construct for quality of education**

After almost 30 years research and practice on the quality of education, we submit that this can be construed as a *mixture of realities, perceptions and attitudes related to the way in which the education providers and beneficiaries behave in order to learn about and meet their respective needs, both the ones they are aware of and*

the ones they are not aware of. This construct has the advantage of covering all the relevant aspects of quality and also, of stressing the psychological implications of it. The use of the construct will generate a series of implications on quality assurance.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The current quality assurance system for Higher education in Romania generated a large number of unforeseen negative consequences, as outlined in the section Problem statement. To a large extent, this was due to the conceptual foundations of the system, which cannot stand scientific scrutiny.

The alternative construct that we have submitted calls for a comprehensive overhaul of the system, including:

- Changes in the Quality of education Law, related to both defining the quality of education and the design of the quality assurance system;
- Establishing a research department within the national quality assurance agency, to explore needs of both beneficiaries and providers of higher education, as well as attractiveness of higher education and teaching career;
- Simplifying current quality assessment procedures of ARACIS and adapting them to the new quality of education construct and to the specific funding sources for both providers and beneficiaries of higher education;
- Making use of quality assessment results to formulate descriptive recommendations and suggestions, rather than making classifications and denying access to resources;
- Undertaking periodic assessments of Ministry of Education policies and funding capability for teaching, research, infrastructure, etc., and making recommendations for future practice.

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